

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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C O N F I D E N T I A L MADRID 6771

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: PBOR, SP, UK
SUBJECT: BRITISH EMBASSY OFFICIAL ON OWEN VISIT, GIBRALTAR

REF: MADRID 6727

1. IN CONVERSATION WITH EMBOFF, BRITISH EMBASSY CHIEF OF CHANCERY THOMAS EXPRESSED PLEASURE AT HOW THE OWEN VISIT HAD GONE, ADDING THAT OWEN HIMSELF HAD MADE SOMETHING OF A POINT WITH HIS HOSTS THAT IT HAD BEEN SOME TIME SINCE ANY BRITISH MINISTER HAD VISITED SPAIN, AN INDICATION OF A CHANGE IN LONDON'S PERCEPTION OF SPAIN AND OF SUPPORT FOR SPAIN'S POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT. OWEN AND SPANISH FONMIN OREJA HAD GOTTEN ALONG WELL PERSONALLY, SAID THOMAS, PERHAPS PARTLY BECAUSE THEY ARE OF THE SAME GENERATION.

2. IT WAS OWEN'S CONVICTION, ACCORDING TO THOMAS, THAT THE GIBRALTAR QUESTION SHOULD BE HANDLED AT THE MINISTERIAL LEVEL, WHERE GREATER "BOLDNESS" WAS ALLOWED THAN AT THE "OFFICIAL" LEVEL. WHILE GIBRALTAR HAD NOT BEEN THE ONLY MATTER DISCUSSED (SEE BELOW), IT HAD DOMINATED THE FIRST (PRIVATE) OWEN-OREJA MEETING AND HAD FIGURED STRONGLY IN
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SUBSEQUENT MEETINGS AS WELL.

3. OWEN HAD BEEN FIRM ON THE POINT THAT HE COULD NOT DISCUSS A CHANGE IN SOVEREIGNTY, BECAUSE HE SIMPLY COULD NOT GO AROUND THE GIBRALTARIANS ON A MATTER AFFECTING THEIR FUTURE. THE DIFFERENCE IN THE CASE OF THE FAULKLAND ISLANDS, WHICH THOMAS NOTED THE SPANISH PRESSED ON REPEATEDLY,

WAS SIMPLY THAT IN THAT CASE HMG COULD GET AWAY WITH IT. IN CONTRAST, THE GIBALTARIAN POPULATION, ALTHOUGH SMALL IN NUMBER, WAS CAPABLE OF CREATING TREMENDOUS PRESSURE IN LONDON, AS IT HAD DONE IN 1968, WHEN A LABOUR GOVERNMENT HAD BEEN ON THE VERGE OF DISCUSSING SOVEREIGNTY. ON THE OTHER HAND, SAID THOMAS, HMG WERE NOT TAKING THE POSITION THAT THE REFERENDUM IN GIBALTAR IN THE 1960'S NECESSARILY REPRESENTED GIBALTARIAN SENTIMENT FOR ALL TIME, AND THE SPANISH HAD BEEN INFORMED OF THIS.

4. OWEN HAD ALSO MADE THE POINT, THOMAS CONTINUED, THAT EASING THE RESTRICTIONS AROUND GIBALTAR WOULD HELP GIBALTARIAN FEELINGS TO EVOLVE TO A MORE POSITIVE STANCE TOWARDS SPAIN. AT THE SAME TIME, HMG RECOGNIZED THAT (ALTHOUGH THE TERM WAS NOT USED IN DISCUSSIONS HERE) THE GOS NEEDED SOME FACE-SAVER IF IT WERE TO EASE THE RESTRICTIONS. THOMAS ADDED AN EXPRESSION OF HIS OWN CONCERN, REGARDING WHICH HE SAID HE WOULD NOT LIKE TO BE QUOTED, THAT THE GIBALTARIANS MIGHT BE QUITE HAPPY IF THE RESTRICTIONS WERE LIFTED BUT COULD STILL INSIST ON MAINTAINING THE BRITISH LINK, IF ONLY FOR THE CONSIDERABLE ECONOMIC SUPPORT THE LINK PROVIDED. IN ANY CASE, HE SAID, HMG HAD TO BE CAREFUL OF APPEARING TO PROMISE THAT LIFTING THE RESTRICTIONS WOULD SOMEHOW ASSURE A TRANSFORMATION OF GIBALTARIAN FEELING ON THE SOVEREIGNTY QUESTION.

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5. OWEN HAS ALSO MADE THE POINT THAT (AS REPORTED IN REFTTEL AND IN THE PRESS) BRITISH SUPPORT FOR SPAIN'S ENTRY INTO THE EC WAS IN NO WAY CONDITIONED ON THE GIBALTAR PROBLEM. INDICATING THAT THERE HAD BEEN SOME SENTIMENT IN FCO IN FAVOR OF SOME SORT OF LINKAGE, THOMAS EXPRESSED RELIEF THAT OWEN'S VIEW HAD PREVAILED, NOTING THAT FOR ONE THING THE OTHER EIGHT MIGHT HAVE HAD SOMETHING TO SAY ABOUT ANY SUCH BRITISH EFFORT. BRITAIN HAD IN FACT BECOME, IN THOMAS' VIEW, ONE OF THE FIRMEST SUPPORTERS OF SPAIN'S EC ENTRY. ON NATO, HE SAID, OWEN HAD SIMPLY NOTED THAT HMG RECOGNIZED SPAIN HAD ITS MIND YET TO MAKE UP ON THE MEMBERSHIP QUESTION, BUT THAT IT COULD COUNT ON BRITISH SUPPORT IF IT WERE TO DECIDE TO JOIN.

6. OWEN HAD ALSO REASSURED THE SPANISH THAT AS FAR AS HMG WERE CONCERNED, GIBALTAR WAS OF NO STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE TO BRITAIN ITSELF, THOMAS SAID; HE ADDED HE WAS GLAD OWEN HAD DONE SO, BUT THE SPANISH INTIMATED SOME SKEPTICISM ABOUT THE POINT. (WE ARE CONFIDENT THAT IN FACT THEY DID NOT BELIEVE IT, THE ROCK'S STRATEGIC VALUE BEING AN ARTICLE OF FAITH HERE.)

7. AS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE ISSUE, THOMAS CONCLUDED, WHILE

THERE WAS NOW UNQUESTIONABLY A BETTER ATMOSPHERE, PROGRESS WAS BY NO MEANS ASSURED. THE CURRENT INDICATIONS WERE THAT ON THE UN SIDE NEITHER THE COMMITTEE OF 24 NOR THE FOURTH COMMITTEE WAS INTERESTED IN TAKING UP THE MATTER THIS YEAR: IF THAT SITUATION CHANGED, HMG AND THE GOS WOULD HAVE TO GET TOGETHER TO WORK SOMETHING UP, ALTHOUGH THE "OFFICIAL" LEVEL WOULD SUFFICE FOR SUCH AN EXERCISE. OVERALL, AS LONG AS SPAIN INSISTED ON WHAT BRITAIN COULD NOT DELIVER, I.E. DISCUSSIONS OF SOVEREIGNTY, IT WOULD HAVE TO BE A MATTER OF TRYING TO INCH THE ISSUE ALONG IN HOPES OF AN EVENTUAL BREAK-THROUGH. EATON

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